I Hope I Join the Band
Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric

Frankie Condon
FOR RICK
and interdependent upon one another; the point is to extend those stories beyond the individual into the historical experience of a group.

Significant to this book is the recognition that stories of the racial experiences of whites are also suppressed—albeit in different ways, for different purposes, and with different effects—to occlude the significance of racial identity to the lived experience, social standing, access, and privilege of whites. The challenge of antiracist epistemology and rhetoric for whites is to write into that suppressed story one’s own commonality, but also agency, responsibility, and accountability: to explore the interpersonal relationships between one’s own story and that which has been suppressed, not as aberrational experience, but as either collective or contiguous historical, social, and lived experience. And the point is to dis-function whiteness, writing one-as-relation into suppressed stories not as a means of conscription or appropriation, but through the sustained practice of transmemoration: of remembering without denying, suppressing, or stealing the memories of others.

There is work to be done in resistance to racism and there are ways to share the work. But how to be and become an ally is not self-evident. We who are raced white have to learn to unmake ourselves in order that we might make allies of ourselves. We need to learn to imagine that we might not only see, but also be and become in and of the mind of deep time. Imagine making our relations with the wind-ruffling surface of waters curling round the feet of a Sand Hill and the red-winged blackbird who rests there for a moment in the space-in-between of the wetland. Imagine making our relations with the play of light and shadow across a mountain face and the mischievous eyes of the coyote who wanders up from the plains to the precipice to see what she might be there. Imagine that we might hear the voice of deep time in the stories we are told, might be in and of that voice, yielding, submitting to its harmonies and its grace notes—and conjointing with them.

6
AFTER THE FIRE, A STILL SMALL VOICE

with Vershawn A. Young

The following chapter began with the exchange of letters written between November 2010 and late January 2011 between Vershawn Ashanti Young and me. Vershawn and I met in Chicago one winter at a conference on race and writing centers at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Probably, you too have had the experience of meeting someone and having the sense that you have been given, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, the gift of a chance meeting—an opportunity for a friendship deep and kind and challenging in the best sense.

Friendships require work, and, in truth, the work of friendship, like the work demanded by all our relations, is integral to the possibility of going on together; the necessity for doing the work never ends. It is a mark of the authenticity of the care that animates all sorts of relationships when this work feels joyful even in the hardest moments. In the case of transracial friendships, I think, that joy may develop more slowly, as we learn how to believe that we can lean in toward one another without leaning unduly on one another: that together we can resist the power racism possesses to distort, subvert, and ultimately destroy relationships that transgress established racial order.

When I first conceived of Vershawn (Vay) playing a role in the writing of this book, I imagined him writing a foreword.
When I asked him, though, he declined. He recalled Keith Gilyard’s response to him following a similar request, in which Keith urged him to allow his work to stand on its own. Vay said I needed to allow my work to stand and questioned why I might need or want the kind of endorsement a foreword typically signifies for my book from a person of color. Vay never said he wouldn’t help with the book, but he thought a foreword was not the way.

These are the kinds of conversations we have every now and again: the kind that stop you in your tracks and make you think long and hard about what you are doing and how and why.

I thought for a while about Vay’s point and decided he was right: that I was wrong to look to him or to any person of color to offer an imprimatur of my work’s legitimacy. The book needed to stand on its own. But I kept on thinking beyond this conclusion. I thought about the strands of the book that trace possibilities for care, for affiliative relations across racial lines, for mutual engagement and the embrace of challenge such engagement offers, and for love as the question that begins, but can never conclude or resolve, the struggle for racial justice. I went back to Vay and asked him to write with me, to coauthor a chapter in which we might both describe the potential and the challenges of transracial alliance and friendship, but also enact or embody the work those potentials and challenges demand of us. I suggested that we write letters to one another and include them as an epistolary chapter to conclude the manuscript, and he graciously agreed.

The letters we wrote were deliberately personal, although we both knew we were writing for an audience beyond each other. We didn’t talk too much about this choice, but it is my belief that we wrote as we did because both of us know that racism does not confine itself to the public spaces of our lives, but conditions our experiences across boundaries between professional and personal, public and private spheres. Both of our working lives are shaped by our shared conviction that to behave as if our struggles with racism are confined either to the personal or the professional spheres of our lives is to represent ourselves, our commitments, and our understanding of racial formation and the power of racism within and across systems and institutions, inadequately and dishonestly. But we have also written personally, I think, because we know not only that this is what the work looks like—moving along perspectival horizons and fields of experience fluidly and dynamically—but this is what the work is. It demands of us that we resist both the external pressure and the inward desire to hide oneself (as if one could, in any case). Antiracist activism, antiracist pedagogy, and transracial friendship and alliance call us all to recognition and acknowledgment that race matters, that racism is real, and that these realities demand address wherever we are: at home, at work, in our communities—within and in service of the relationships we hold dear.

As we reread the letters and talked about them together, Vay and I realized that in writing them each of us had taken up, implicitly at least, big questions. These questions, we believe, may be at some level unresolvable, but must be asked and continuously engaged by antiracist activists as an integral part of the work we do in our communities, our classrooms, and our lives. These, we thought, were not so much questions of the sort one might find on a test or might Google to find an answer. The questions around which the letters were composed stood more as queries, and the letters themselves as meditations.

When it comes to the work of antiracism, there are seasons of rage—times of witness when anger seems a most rational response. Peace and civil rights activist Barbara Deming once noted a distinction, however, between that rage that seeks the absence or death of an Other and that concatenation of anger and love which “is the concentration of one’s whole being in the determination: this must change” (n.d.). Deming wrote further of the nesting of rage and love within one another, noting that “only if we accept the presence of ambivalence in the most loving encounters does truth become . . . that which supports evolving human nature in the midst of antagonisms, because
these antagonisms call for conscious insight rather than for moralistic repression." There is much to be learned from a long lean into the burn of rage to discern its sources. But if we are to keep on keeping on, I think, we must also lean into and attend to more still moments—moments when, in company with one another, we can burn with conviction and, at the same time, dare to explore the dimensions of ethical (that is to say, thick) relations and to inquire with and for one another more quietly and with care. This is the work of query and meditation.

My knowledge of queries emerges from my involvement in Quaker faith communities. In this context, queries are designed to invite both individual and collective discernment: to test the ways and degrees to which we live the principles we espouse, to offer spiritual and intellectual challenge, and to encourage ongoing vision and revision of perception, consciousness, and action. The point of queries understood in these ways is not to answer them and be done. The point is to stay in consideration of the complex matters that queries raise. Queries function in some way as a guide that does not show you the way, but supports you as you find your own way. Because of their openness, queries invite seekers or learners to return over and over to them, leaning into their challenges anew, revising and reframing meditations stimulated by them.

Vershawn and I offer the following queries and our letters as examples of the ways in which friends and allies within multiracial antiracist activist communities might practice discernment together; might recognize and acknowledge difference while seeking understanding; might talk well and deeply together and stay with the possibility, as well as the limits, of love, through challenge and disagreement. As is the way with correspondence, readers will note that in some cases only one letter takes up a query, while in others the letters unfold as a more extended dialogue around a query. The letters are interrelated across queries so that readers may also notice the ways in which themes or strands reappear and may be woven into a single letter or letters.

Antiracist activists share, I believe, a collective desire for racial justice. We are as susceptible as any other community, however, and perhaps more so, to dispute and to the possibility of being driven apart, our alliances shattered by differences in the kind and quality of our convictions. There are no safe spaces in which to talk about race and racism. In truth, I often think that safety—emotional, spiritual, and intellectual safety, I mean—is not a condition conducive to meaningful antiracist labors. We need conditions in which we can challenge and be challenged, change and be changed. We need conditions in which we can engage with and for one another. To use queries well, as to work with one another well, we need to offer one another serious, compassionate commitments to honesty, forgiveness, confidentiality, clarity, and responsiveness. To the extent that we enact this kind of an offer (or appeal, in the rhetorical sense), we can create shelter spaces where we may not be safe, but where we know we are not alone and will not be cast out. The shelter spaces and the discipline of collective discernment that is possible within them sustain collective antiracist action, even as they nurture and sustain friendship, care, camaraderie, and solidarity.

**QUERY**

What role does shame play in our engagement with or resistance to the work of antiracism? Do we recognize and acknowledge our sense of shame without becoming submerged in those feelings? Do we work to convert shame to conviction, energy, and will to claim and enact agency in our activism?

**Meditation on Shame and on Living in and against a Raced-White Skin**

Dear Vay,

You wrote something once that grabbed me, that stayed with me—words that linger and unhinge me just a little bit as you write that you also might be perceived as being unhinged for writing them. You wrote:
I ain’t no homeboy—though I long to be and would do anything short of killing to gain that identity—I’m not ghetto enough for the ghetto. Because I’m not a white boy, I’m not white enough for white folks. And because I wasn’t born in the middle class, I’m not completely accepted by the mainstream. And sometimes, if you can believe it, I’m not ghetto enough for white folks! The psychoemotional pain that this liminal existence creates, the pain of negotiating multiple cultural and racial worlds, is far too great for many. I’ve been doing it a long time and have been able to cope only by transforming my personal problem into an intellectual one. In some ways, I’m chipping away at the burden. But far too many are not able to do this. And why should they have to? (2007, xvi)

When first I read these words, they grabbed onto me because they reminded me of my brother, of Rick’s experience of being stuck in-between, never white enough and never red enough, and of the reality that he has only found in rare moments ways to study his situation, his experience, as a means of surviving and thriving within it. The pain of living his liminality and, for me, the pain of witnessing his struggles and knowing—knowing—that I have played an active role in producing his pain and enforcing his liminality if for no other reason than that as a white sister I stood for the untraversable boundary—have been nearly unbearable, have shaped our separate yet intertwined lives, our separate yet intertwined racial performances, in unbearable ways. Crazy-making ways. And both my brother and I have a little bit of crazy going on.

But these words you penned touched me in another way as well, raised right up out of the racial aquifer of my own sense of self, another truth—not an analogous experience, but a related sense or feeling. For as long as I can remember I have loathed—hated—the fact of my own whiteness. I’ve yearned, dreamed, begged God to make me something else, somebody else, to give me a way out of my skin and all the historical and right-now baggage that attends possessing or at least occupying this skin.

When I was a little girl, I read a book called All-of-a-Kind Family. As an adult, I read the title of that book alongside my childish love of the story it tells and just have to smile a bit. Of course, that was my dream: to be part of an all-of-a-kind family. But my dream wasn’t for all of us to be white; it was for all of us to be Indian, with Rick. Anyway, in this book, there are five little girls, sisters, in a poor immigrant family—a Jewish family. I read that book over and over and over again; I drank it in; I dreamed that book. I yearned for us all to be Jewish. Maybe becoming Jewish was an attainable transformation, I thought. I took a candelabra and put it in our window, imagining it to be a reasonable approximation of a Menorah, and set the candles alight—until my dad found it and dressed me down for coming close to setting the curtains on fire and burning down the house.

A few years later, my dad, a pianist, became the faculty advisor for a black student singing group on campus: the Gospelmeeers. Rick and I waited impatiently for every concert. We loved that group, loved their music, loved the students who sang with the group—who played with us and teased us and lifted us up with their voices, their songs. Every year, my dad hosted a picnic for the Gospelmeeers at our home. Rick and I loved those picnics. My dad had two baby grand pianos in his music room. The Gospelmeeers would crowd around those pianos to sing, and the beauty of their music was unbearable.

Rick and I would race between the music room where we listened, enthralled, and the basement, where we watched the old beams on which the floors above rested bend and shake in time with the dancing feet of the singers above. “To be young, gifted and black / Oh what a precious dream / To be young gifted and black / Open your heart to what I mean,” they sang, and I did, or I tried as hard as I could to open my heart. “When you feel really low / Yeah, there’s a great truth you should know / When you’re young, gifted and black / Your soul’s intact.” I tried. And I knew, knew, my soul was not, in fact, intact. It couldn’t be, for I was torn apart by the history of my skin (even then I knew), by the ways in which I belonged, capitalized
on my belonging, and wished with all my heart to not belong to my skin. I wanted so much to be black. And Rick did too, I know. If we were black, we'd be an all-of-a-kind-family with the Gospelers. We'd belong with them and they with us. My soul would be intact and Rick's too.

There are times, lots and lots and lots of times, when I am moved by what I see and hear of whiteness to howl, to shake with rage, to sob at the impotence of my words and my activism. I am not healed, y'all. I hate my skin. Neither Rick nor I would ever escape our skins, however. We would be, are still, caught in spaces-in-between and not in the same spaces-in-between, but in liminalities that are interrelated yet separate, separated from one another and also from our peoples—those who claim us as well as those with whom we most yearn for affiliation.

Many years ago, before I went back to graduate school, I spent quite a bit of time in Japan working as an actor with the avant-garde Japanese director, Tadashi Suzuki. One day, a friend of mine, who worked as a translator for Suzuki-San, told me that he had been asked to translate during a press interview with the premiere Butoh dancer at that time, Yoko Ashikawa. I don't know how much you know about Butoh. In brief, Butoh is an avant-garde dance method(s) and form(s) that developed in Japan after World War II and in particular during the student movements of the late fifties and sixties. Sometimes referred to as the dance of the dark soul, Butoh explores the depths of human feeling and experience—sorrow and absurdity, sexuality and anguish, the body as comedy and tragedy. My friend, whom knew I was fascinated by Butoh, invited me to attend the interview. Ashikawa spoke of the catastrophic dimensions of human tragedy and of the necessity of mourning those aspects of identity, culture, connectedness to history, to tradition, that are lost forever to the boundless universe. I understood her to be describing in metaphorical terms the nuclear holocausts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I understood also that Ashikawa experienced her dance not as the singular performance of an individual, but as the performance of collective mourning—the cry of a people and a people's search for meaning in the face of tragedy. She said that when she dances, it is as if she throws away her limbs to the universe without expectation of their return. And in this act of sacrifice, of hope and hopelessness, of faith and faithlessness, she seeks the bottommost point of mourning, the deepest place of sorrow. For only by dancing there, Ashikawa said, is healing possible.

I have thought about Ashikawa's words for years, mulling them over, feeling their power, reaching, stretching to understand, to make sense of them in the context of my own lived experience, my own personal history, and the history of my people. For me, running somewhere beneath the work I do, whether in writing or teaching, parenting, or being a daughter, a sister, or a friend, is this sense, this feeling I learned from Ashikawa: to the extent that all of us mourn—and we must mourn, I believe—what racism has done to us all, I understand that the dance of peoples of color is and must be different from mine—that the range of destructive, dehumanizing conditions that lead to identity formation in the crucible of racism have qualitatively different and greatly magnified effects on peoples of color than they do on whites. But I understand that whites must also dance, must also mourn, and through mourning, heal. We whites must do something more than watch and shake our heads, tsk tsk tsking the mourning and the rage of peoples of color. We must now allow ourselves to feel the weight of loss, in all its dimensions, that racism has caused us—to our material and spiritual lives as well as to our personhood. We human beings belong to one another and because we do we bear responsibility not only for the impact of our own choices on one another, but also for the choices others have made and continue to make in our name. Whites, I believe, need to offer a dance of reparation absent the hope that we could ever give enough to compensate either for the history of racism or for our own complicity in that history. And it can't be guilt (that oh-gosh-I'm-sorry-now-let's-move-on kind of affect) that drives this dance so much as shame. We should feel shame. And the work
should be not so much as to avoid or squelch feelings of shame as they emerge in white consciousness, but to acknowledge and discern how we might best move given the fact of our shame—how we might dance at the bottom of our own mourning.

We’ve talked before about how compelling I find Elspeth Probyn’s work. Her book, Vay, is so good (Blush: The Faces of Shame). In it, Probyn posits shame as a productive relational force. If guilt is an effect of choices badly made and a temporary condition attached to a social moment that is merely a moment, if guilt is a sensation through which one can pass (perhaps more easily with a brief acknowledgment and apology), shame is a feeling that remains, Probyn says. Shame is the emotional product of interest, of the arrest of “our intense attachment to the world, our desire to be connected with others, and the knowledge that, as merely human, we will sometimes fail in our attempts to make those connections.” “When we feel shame,” she continues, “it is because our interest has been interfered with but not canceled out. The body wants to continue being interested, but something happens to incompletely reduce that interest” (2005, 15). Guilt, Probyn notes, is easy and temporary, but “shame lingers deep within the self. Being shamed is not unlike being in love. The blush resonates with the first flush of desire. It carries the uncertainty about oneself and about the object of love; the world is revealed anew and the skin feels raw. Shame makes us quiver” (2).

Shame is less an effect of surrender or exposure than it is the experience of the incompleteness of love and the reading of that incompleteness back against the self such that one is forced to wonder whether “there is something inimical in oneself which keeps love from reaching completion” (Hegel quoted in Probyn, 3). Shame is both an effect and a producer of terror that we have been abandoned in some desolate place, beyond the reach and care of humanity; shame, says Probyn, is a sign of our fragility (3).

This explication of shame resonates powerfully for me. I feel it not as a destructive force, but as a life and love force, productive, deeply invested with desire for relationship. I think, Vay, that those of us who are white especially need to recognize that our shame (and the dance of shame that might constitute white antiracism) is as comedic as tragic, as absurd as studied, as infused with joy as with anguish. As counterintuitive as such a claim may seem to those who see shame as a destructive affect or emotion, shame, I think, is necessary and productive. Shame, thus conceived, teaches the kind of humility that might enable us to stay with the question, to stay with and for one another, to stay at the table. Shame is, I think, for me (and I believe for white antiracists, generally) the condition of the joint at which our lives as raced beings are articulated. And learning to dance there at the joint is, I think, the enabling condition for love that subverts the rules of racial standing—love for Rick, my brother; and for you, my friend. It neither solves nor resolves; it is unspeakable—as filled with laughter and light as with despair. It dances without expectation of return.

QUERY

Are we all alert in our transracial relationships to those moments when we begin to enact color-blind ideology? Do we acknowledge the pressure on all of us to perform whiteness against one another and against ourselves? Do we acknowledge the pressure whiteness exerts on all of us in service of preserving a racial status quo?

Meditation on Whiteness and Silence

Dear Frankie:

It was serendipitous reading your opening chapters because I had been reading at the same time, preparing for class, James Baldwin’s essay “White Man’s Guilt,” and reading the following words, that might as well be my own: “I have often wondered, and it is not a pleasant wonder, just what white Americans talk about with one another. I wonder this because they do not, after all, seem to find very much to say to me, and I concluded long ago that they found the color of my skin inhibiting” (1985, 410; italics in original).
Oh, I hate the silence that race breeds! How it becomes the cat that takes white people's tongues when I point to completely obvious racism and they say, "Ignore it. That wasn't about being black. That was about class." They're willing to accept any other cause for some injustice or experience, as long as it ain't about race, Frankie. I told you after reading the opening chapters that it seemed you are writing self-consciously to these white people, to the goodly ones, the whitely whites. And thank God someone is. For many of my whitely acquaintances, the whitely people I meet, often feel immobilizing racial guilt. "And," to quote from Baldwin, "to have to deal with such people can be unutterably exhausting, for they," he says, "with a really dazzling ingenuity, a tireless agility, are perpetually defending themselves against charges which one ... has not really, for the moment, made." But what's so ironic, Frankie, is, as Baldwin says, "One does not have to make them [the charges]... The record is there for all to read. It resounds all over the world. It might as well be written in the sky." And what you're doing here, in this book, for white people, is echoing Baldwin's wish "that Americans—white Americans—would read, for their own sakes, this record and stop defending themselves against it. Only then will they be enabled to change their lives" (1985, 410).

And isn't that the point? Isn't that one of the reasons why you're writing to white people? But aren't you also writing to me? Of course. You're also writing to that black administrator who questioned whether your mother should have been teaching, had the right to teach, the black experience in film. You're asking that we all take a look. Find no easy answers. But, all the same, interrogate.

Sure, I'm taking this personally. I have to. You quote me, from my book, the anguish I feel at being black, the desire I had (oh, Lord, the desire I have!) to be white, a whiteness Baldwin, in his famous essay "Price of the Ticket" explains: "The price of the black ticket is involved—fatally—with the dream of becoming white" (1985, xiv). He explains the danger in this desire, one that connects people of color, to your whitely readers: "This is not possible," Baldwin cautions, "partly because white people are not white: part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are" (1985, ix).

So, I hear in your pages Baldwin's command, "White man, hear me!" I hear these words with a complex difference. The white man who should hear isn't really white, surely not only white, he's also whitely-black, whitely-Latin, whitely-Iranian, and he really isn't a he, surely not only a he, but also she, or a him-she—it's all of us who are on the path, the only path, I say, that America holds out to us, particularly in school, in education, the path to become white. What you want us to hear about our collective racial history, and our personal ones, I find, yes, again, in the words of Baldwin, whom I'll quote at length and end:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past... [History] is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history." (1985, 410; italics in original)

Let's change history, my friend.

**QUERY**

Do we acknowledge and are we reflective about the ways in which racial identity complicates transracial relations? Do we think carefully and critically about our readiness in every context in which we may be called
to lead or teach? Do we teach across racial lines with humility and tenderness to help one another learn and grow?

Meditation on Teaching and Leading across Racial Lines

Dear Yay,

My mom told me recently that she regrets not having stayed in that conversation with the black administrator. She said that the cost of her refusal to stay fell on the students, who wanted and needed courses focused on their history and taught in ways that empowered. One of the struggles for white academics, it seems to me, is to recognize the extent to which our advanced degrees, the long-cultivated habits of mind we possess and take pride in, all our book learning, does not, in fact, prepare us for the work of antiracism. Of course, my mom was qualified to teach black experience in film—at some level. She had studied, had labored long and hard at those studies, had been taught by some of the finest historians in the country, had been certified by a fine university. She knew her stuff. She knew her stuff. But, as a white woman, to teach black experience? In what way would all that book learning prepare her to do that?

I’ve tried imagining a different tide for that course; what if she had retitled it Representations of Blacks in American Film? In some ways, I do suspect that the course, titled this way, would not have raised questions in exactly the same way, but the concerns would have nagged, perhaps, nonetheless. Could my mom, under any circumstances, have addressed the critical matter of impact as a matter of lived experience? Of course, she and her students could have read the accounts of black actors who were denied roles in those films so that white actors could play at being people of color, or the accounts of black actors who did perform in the films, accounts of black directors and producers. They could have read about the critical reception of such films in black communities and the reviews of black critics. They could have read about impact. But would this have helped my mom or her students to address the matter of the impact of those representations on her students? Maybe the question

that black administrator was trying to pose to my mom had to do not with her qualifications to teach the history of race and representation in America, or of film history, but to teach her students—the young adults gathered in that classroom each week. Maybe that was the question my mom was just unprepared in that moment so long ago to hear and to which she was unprepared to respond.

One of the critical points I’m trying to make in the book, Yay, is that no one knows instinctively or ontologically how to enact antiracism as activism, as pedagogy, or both. Our degrees and honors and certifications, valuable as they may be, do not prepare us for this work. This is a way of thinking, being, acting that must be learned—and that can’t be mastered, certified, or credentialed. The question of whether or how we are or might be prepared as antiracists to organize, to act, to teach, is particularly vexed, I think, for white activists and teachers. I believe I have a particular responsibility to address racism well and meaningfully in my community, in the classrooms where I teach, and in the writing centers I administer.

And one of the key elements in all of the antiracism trainings I’ve participated in has been preparation to step up as a white person, to take responsibility for opening the conversation with other whites, for teaching—to not expect or rely on peoples of color to do all the work when it comes to resisting racism. But the trainings I’ve attended have been activist-centered and I’m not sure any of them have taken up the challenge faced by my mom, a challenge I now face as well. I teach in multiracial classrooms. What is it that qualifies me to teach about racism, to teach resisting racism to students of color?

Let me tell you a story or two from this semester. There are fifteen students in my writing-center theory and practice course. Of those, five are American students of color (one of whom is a first-generation immigrant) and two are international students of color. One of the books on our reading list is Harry Dennys new book Facing the Center, and a few weeks ago we were discussing that text in class. Jenna (I’ve given her a pseudonym), who
identifies as a black woman, raised her hand. “This book really seems like it was written for white people,” she said. I don’t know if you’ve read it yet, Vay, but Harry’s book takes up identity and difference in the writing center with chapters on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexual orientation that introduce readers to current theories of identity, to the complexity of identities as they are performed in the context of a writing center, and to ways of thinking about teaching/tutoring among and across diverse identities. “Say more, Jenna,” I prompted. “Why does it seem that way to you?” “Well,” said Jenna, “I don’t need all this instruction. This is the world I live in. It’s multicultural all the time. All of my friends, all of my family, every community I belong to—I just already know all this stuff.”

I’m not sure I did a very good job of answering Jenna, Vay. For one thing, and this I did tell her, she may well be right. It may well be true that Harry’s book is written to straight, white, middle-class, third- or fourth-generation Americans. There is this way in which I am aware when I am teaching about race and racism that the students in my classroom to whom what and how I am teaching will be new are the white students. I’m trying all the time to teach well without recentering whiteness. I tried to explain this to Jenna, with the rest of the class looking on. I am aware of this tension and of the degree to which I might be teaching, simultaneously, two different subjects. I am aware that even as I am teaching my white students about racism, I am inviting students of color to bear witness and to subject what I say and how I say it, to subject me, really—my antiracist praxis—to their critical gaze. I’m trying to shift the center from whiteness, from whiteness, to performative resistance where the actor is white. And I’m aware all the time of how fine these lines are, how tenuous my claims, my justifications, are.

But there is more than this to say and I didn’t say it all to Jenna on that day in class. I thought, but didn’t say, that she may well be right in suggesting that she doesn’t need the instruction Harry offers in his book. Jenna is a young woman who may well do a little rocking of the world someday. She wants to be a lawyer. She’s deep and thoughtful, deliberative, and wise. Jenna, in particular, already possesses a keen insight into the racial dynamics of social relations and an extraordinary ability to write into and against the force of racism. But even Jenna might not have it all down, might not know everything she’ll need or want to know to engage critically, meaningfully, in a performative anti-racism. Do Harry or I have a role in teaching her this? Could we teach her? What would be our qualifications to teach Jenna? And, truthfully, not all students of color have seen what Jenna has seen, know what Jenna knows, are able to act, to perform, as Jenna is able to do. What of them?

Here’s another story. Robert (not his real name) is a Puerto Rican American who spent his childhood in the Bronx, moving to Lincoln with his mom in high school. He is taking my class this semester, but has already started working in the writing center. One day in class, we were working on tutoring practice in a fishbowl kind of arrangement. Robert and the writer with whom he was consulting were sitting in the center of a circle of chairs so that all the other students were observing the consultation. To open the conversation, Robert, who had quickly read through the text in his hand, said something like, “Well, you’ve got a good start here. Of course there are a lot of grammatical errors, and we’ll get to those as we talk through your work.” I stopped the consultation and asked Robert to talk about why he had chosen to open the conversation in that way. “Well,” said Robert, “I’m aware, I mean, I have this instinct, that sometimes when writers come into the writing center and see me, with my brown skin, and they hear me speak, they think I’m not qualified to teach them anything. So, I want to make sure they know right off that I see their mistakes. I want them to know I’m not going to miss anything.” “Oh my God!” I thought to myself, “How am I going to speak into this moment?!”

I told Robert that I wanted to honor both his sense, his instinct, about how he is sometimes read by writers in the writing center and his courage in naming that reading aloud to the class. I cannot, I told the class, in good faith, say that Robert is
wrong. I know, because of how students try to schedule appointments, because of what students write to me in emails, because of what students write in consultation evaluations, that there are student-writers who doubt the competence of the consultants of color with whom they work. I said that, for me, what needs to be front and center in any consultation is student learning. I want consultants to make deliberate and reflective choices about when and how they address the problem of error in service of student learning. This does not mean, I went on to say, overlooking error, but choosing carefully when and how to address it. On the other hand, I am aware—have, in fact, quite consciously constructed a situation in which student-writers might unlearn some of their notions about who is or isn’t a writer, who is or isn’t a teacher or tutor, about their own competencies and those of other writers, through their encounters with a diverse staff of writing center consultants—a staff that includes writers of color, international ELL consultants, and queer consultants. I told Robert, with the rest of the class looking on, the story of Elijah and Passover. I told him how curious I had felt about that Passover ritual of leaving a door ajar for Elijah and about how I had gone looking for stories of Passover to learn why that door might be left open. I told them about the Rabbinical accounts I read and how so many of them included not only the story of Elijah’s return as a heralding of the coming of the Messiah, but also the story of leaving the door ajar so Christians could see that the Jews were not drinking the blood of Christian babies.

I told Robert that, for me, there is a metaphorical kinship between the practice of leaving the door open for Others to gaze in—to unlearn the distrust, the hate they know—and his practice of pointing to error as a means of demonstrating his competence in the face of unsupported, discriminatory doubt. These choices are understandable and they ought to make all of us tremble in some sense; ought to shake our complacency about the “safety” and “comfort” of the places where we dwell both literally and figuratively. I think I made reference to your article “Momma’s Memories and the New Equality,” which we had read previously. The challenge, for all of us, I said, is to find ways to expose and trouble, to shake down those wicked preconceptions of (in)competence, for example, that are attached to racial identity (or other identities marked in the dominant everyday as Other) without reenacting or recapitulating other similarly dismissive, discrediting, or disempowering practices—without using “the master’s tools.” I did not try to tell Robert how to do that. After all this work, Vay, after all this thinking and talking and writing and learning, unlearning and relearning, I still do not know what to tell Robert.

I didn’t say, but I know it’s true, that I have learned the ways of thinking, speaking, writing about which I write here, and which I’ve been teaching all semester in my writing-center theory and practice class, from peoples of color in the antiracism movement. I’ve learned by watching, by listening carefully, by being called out and leaning in to learn from those moments. The epistemology and rhetoric constituted by storytelling and the historicizing of story, by decentering, nuancing, and by thinking and acting in and through a long now—these are conceptual frames and practices of which I would have no knowledge and which I would have no experience were it not for the kindness, the generosity, and the instruction of peoples of color within the antiracism movement. I’ve tried to give voice to that which I’ve observed, tried, and tested. I’ve tried to pass forward in the book that which I’ve learned to other whites. I think I have to pass these matters forward to my students of color as well and I have to learn to do this, somehow, with an awareness of, a responsiveness to, their multiple and various lived experiences. I have to do this even as I resist appropriating either those experiences or those forms of intervention and resistance that must belong to peoples of color. And I think I have to do this without reenacting whiteness—without wearing those washed-out, worn-out, nasty old garments of paternalism, “noblese oblige,” condescension. I have to keep thinking about, keep questioning, my qualifications to teach my students
of color well without "throwing up my hands" or abdicating my responsibility to act, to be an actor, not a player.

QUERY

Do we seek together to understand the conditions that make trust possible in transracial friendships, partnerships, and alliances? Do we give trust generously on one hand, and recognize that trust is earned on the other? Do we seek always to act with integrity in our relations with one another and do we talk well and deeply with one another about what acting with integrity might mean?

Meditations on Trust

Dear Frankie:

I knew when I first met you, when I heard you give that keynote speech at the Race and Writing Center Conference at UIC, when you put your own personal history right out in public in the service of antiracism, when you described your brother Rick's experience with racism, of being called a nigger; a word you said without restraint, but certainly with the ethics of care, in the service of sharing that experience, to make the problems plain, yes, I knew right then, on that night in early March 2008, that I wanted you to be my friend and colleague. And I told you so after your talk, didn't I? I told you with perhaps too much of the honesty that has gotten me into trouble too often, told you with a caveat drenched in fear that I want to have coffee with you, maybe brandy, to get to know you better, to join this work you're doing. Then I told you: "But I don't trust white people!" Don't trust the antiracists. Actually, only the antiracists. And as I write to you now, I feel the same way, the same trepidation, and the same anxiety about my relationships with white liberals.

Think about it: to say that I don't trust white people who are ultra right winged, the Christian conservative type, the Tea Partiers, or those who voted for the Kentucky neosegregationist Rand Paul, or those who would superimpose the image of a chimpanzee over Michelle Obama's face and publish it on the Internet, or those adherents of Rush Limbaugh, a man who, on the very night of Obama's election, said "I want him to fail," and said more than that, Frankie, he said, "We are being told that we have to hope he succeeds, that we have to bend over, grab the ankles, bend over forward, backward, whichever, because his father was black, because this is the first black president"—to say I don't trust these ones, someone who would spew intertwined homophobic, anti-black criticism, invoking the very fear mongering and racism that ignite lynching mobs and that undergird racist ideologies, including institutional ones, is to state the obvious, to be so annoyingly redundant.

Those types are not trying to cultivate my trust, couldn't care less about it. But you are, aren't you, friend? As also I aim to do in reciprocal return. So I said my thing, and I don't now remember what you said. But I remember what you did. The next day after I gave my solo performance of Your Average Nigga, when a white woman gave an anecdote about being the chair—the chair!—of a search committee that did not hire a black female as a writing teacher because the black interviewee said "he don't" once during her interview, you spoke up. Many in the audience were, to my mind, insufficiently enraged, but you challenged, asking the woman her thoughts on Joseph William's essay "The Phenomenology of Error." You said we all make errors, particularly in speech. Why was this woman's mishap so glaring, so big that it cost her the job? And you pointed to the very racialized thinking. Oh, why don't I just say it? The very racist thinking of so many white liberals. That woman actually was wringing her hands, as so many liberals do. Then throw them up and say, "What do we do?" As if she were the very personification of conjugation, had perfect control over all her verbs, her nouns. But none of us do. Not even when we write. Not even when tutors and copyeditors go over the pages. That woman's anecdote illustrates ingrained racial thinking, the very kind that you're writing about in the book, the kind that happens every day in coffee shops, at business meetings, in writing centers, in writing classrooms. You spoke up! And you keep speaking up, and out!
Oh, I remember, friend, what you did. And I see what you do. I remember we exchanged numbers and emails. I remember we talked. We met at conferences with no political agenda (but we do want to change the world, don’t we?) other than to hang. (What fun!) And I remember coming for visits to your home for the same reasons, meeting Mike, and Grace, and Lucy, and Dan, and your mom, too. I remember, and I see. And now you’ve written this book. And I find myself excited—and anxious—oh, so anxious—all over again. I’m excited because your book invites white liberals, well-meaning, good-hearted people, to listen, not just to you, but, most importantly, to themselves, to their personal histories, to the stories that drive their beliefs, interrogate their own goodliness, whiteness. Let me take your advice, too, here, and tell you a small bit of my own history.

When I say to you that I don’t trust the antiracists, I’m not trying to put you on the spot, to put a burden on you to fulfill my racial expectations, Never may that happen! I’m saying what you say, I think. That it’s a partnership, a deeply reciprocal relationship, where we stick with it: maintain the work despite the obstacles, and despite the (fill in the blank). I’m saying that in my experience, my so-called antiracist colleagues and friends have left too soon and too often. And my mother’s words haunt me: “Don’t trust nobody. Don’t trust white people.” She says that, Frankie, because she believes that when I’m not around, not looking, my white friends will slip up around not-so-well-meaning white people, people they have access to in informal, personal relationships, perhaps people with power, and repeat something I said or did that these other whites find offensive or too black or something, and then I’d be in trouble. She’s scared for me to be friends with white people, Frankie.

I remember Momma pointing out a scene in the movie version of *Roots* when Kizzie was sold to another master. Now Kizzie was a slave, of course, but she believed she was the friend of the master’s daughter, whom she’d play with, talk to, and love. She made the master’s daughter promise not to sell her. But not long after the promise, Kizzie was sold by the father, the master.

And the daughter did nothing. Said nothing. Looked on with indifference. Didn’t even say, “Daddy don’t.” Nothing! These are the kinds of stories Momma thinks of when she advises me not to trust white people. And, I have my own. Not from other people’s nonfiction, but from my own life. The white people I long to trust, to love, indeed have trusted, have loved, are the ones who profess “multiculturalism,” that “racism is bad,” that “feminism is important.” But I see often that they mean this theoretically. And I’m not critiquing them for being imperfect, fallible. Who gets it right all the time? Not me. So who?

But friends are the ones closest to you, next to family. And their slights cut deep. I know this. What I’m saying is that in my experience they don’t consistently stick with it. They certainly haven’t stuck with me! They’d rather I be quiet, don’t start that racial trouble, act right, tow the row, at least wait until they’re indignant. Then I can join them. Ain’t that something? Or, get this, they pull rank with their racial privilege. And attempt to tell me, “Hey buddy, watch it, I’m white,” just before I tell them to go to hell. And, it’s like, “Momma told me so, didn’t she?” And I resist this, want to keep trying. So I do, but with an open acknowledgment of my own stuff, my own history with race, my own distrust and the reasons why right here, laid out on the table.

Dear Vay,

Thank you for writing about trust. I think about my years in the movement, about the white folks who have come and gone, and know, just know that the necessity of earning trust has seemed too much for some, too hard and too time consuming and too unfair given how good we all try to be. I think perhaps that one of the characteristics of whiteness is a consuming interest in the right-here-right-now; to the extent that one becomes aware of being seen, of the critical gaze of peoples of color, one wants to believe or to demand that the judgment of that gaze be based only on this moment absent individual and collective histories, absent memory, and absent the will to make
the way, together, toward futures abundant with possibility. As I
read your letter, I thought of a lesson I took far too long to learn
in my life: whenever anyone says “trust me,” run for the hills.
Whiteness does seem to claim trust by fiat. And when that com-
mand is not obeyed, too many of us white folks absent ourselves
from the work as punishment for peoples of color who have
dared to gaze, perhaps, or because the idea of earning some-
thing so dear as trust seems too overwhelming.

Perhaps I swerve away from writing directly about trust
because I don’t know what can righteously be said by whites like
me about trust. To write of trust is, perhaps, as Barthes sug-
gests, “to confront the much of language: that region of hysteria
where language is both too much and too little, excessive . . .
and impoverished” (1979, 99; italics in original). I am not sure how one
could “read the record,” lean into history as a white person to
learn rather than deny the fact of history’s accretion in our indi-
vidual and collective present tenses and continue to demand
trust, command that others trust us, or even believe that trust is
possible. Trust, at some level, is beside the point. The point, as
you say, is to do something, to act with integrity, but (and here’s
the unremarked underneath of integrity) without expectation of
some return on the investment of doing, acting. Too many whites
slip away from the work of antiracism, I think, because we have
mistakenly acted with the expectation that gratitude and trust
will be our recompense for having acted. Sadly, our departures
undo all we have done—all we might do.

I hear your momma’s caution to you and think, “Of course,
she’s right.” The way of friends, of comrades, of colleagues is
made not in grand pronouncements of care and friendship, of
trust, but in the everyday choices made when we are together as
well as when we are apart, and even and especially in the face
of the truth that we cannot, no matter what, see through one
another or ourselves. Barthes again:

I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know
the other better than anyone and triumphantly assert my knowledge
to the other (“I know you—I’m the only one who really knows
you!”); and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious
fact that the other is impenetrable, intangible, not to be found; I
cannot open up the other; trace back the other’s origins, solve the
riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear
myself out, I shall never know. (1979, 134)

How much more profound is this experience of not know-
ing, of knowing only that one cannot know, when the impos-
sibility of knowing one another, of seeing right through to the
heart, is amplified by histories of racism, by ideologies of race,
by racism in the right-here-right-now! Baldwin is right. Barthes
continues, “ ‘I can’t get to know you’ means ‘I shall never know
what you really think of me.’ I cannot decipher you because I
do not know how you decipher me” (1979, 154). We really must,
I think, let go of our desire to know one another as if there is a
self distinct from what we do in this world. And to undo whit-
eness, all of us whitey folks will have to jettison the notion that
we can be, ought to be, judged by those qualities of interior self,
in spite of what we do (or don’t do). We’ll have to jettison that
sense that the content of our characters could ever exist as free-
floating soul matter apart from our actions and inactions, apart
from what we say and apart from our silences. We compose our
characters as we act with and for one another. There is nothing
else available to us but this on which to base love, or trust, or
friendship, or alliance.

This is a terrible and terrifying reality—a potentially immo-
bilizing truth. What if I make a mistake?! What of my character
when I fail?! But to think in this way is to think as if through
every action or inaction one sees some aspect of one’s character
in stone. We do learn; we do change. We can try to hide our mis-
takes, carrying them with us as secrets (thinnily disguised, what-
ever we may tell ourselves about how deeply we have hidden
them). But there are other choices available to us; we can tell
the stories, and by telling, by making those mistakes available
to ourselves as well as to the critical gaze of others, learn from
them. This, more than trust, for me is the real test of friendship, of alliance, of camaraderie: do we learn with one another?

Oh, My Dearest Frankie:

Over several weeks, I have intermittently labored emotionally and intellectually over my response to the role of trust in anti-racist writing-center and literacy work, a matter about which it seems we disagree. My labor in writing is fueled by a series of self-queries: "Is Frankie prodding me to be clearer about trust? How could I better explain to my friend that trust prompted my first interaction with her and undergirds our very relationship? How do I say to Frankie that without trust, I couldn't be her friend, her colleague? How can I make plain that I would not be able to engage the important project—"to learn from one another"—without knowing she has my back, won't turn on me, will be reliable, will work to build a mutual ethos of interpersonal confidence? These questions began to swirl when I read your statement that "trust, at some level, is beside the point. The point... is to do something, to act with integrity." These questions still swirl because I think of trust differently in this context: it is precisely the point.

But I wonder whether this particular line of reasoning is worth a quibble. And in an earlier draft of this letter I wrote, "Nope, it's not worth it." But after laboring some more, after sitting at the computer far longer than I should because I'm already late for church, after feeling my breath abate as it does when I'm intensely involved in writing, after feeling my forehead wrinkle, mouth clinch, eyes squint, staring at every word I type, trying to be careful, trying to nuance, I've revised my "nope" to "yep." Yep, it's worth an objection.

I see trust at work in our interactions, in these very letters. Would I write to you what I've written, speak so openly and honestly, without trusting you? Uh uh. Surely, not. Trust is the very idea that amplifies for me the key concepts I read in your book, particularly ideas of love and of sticking with it. So I'm going to make a request of you that I hope won't send you running for the hills: "Trust me, Frankie." And, I'm going to make a proclamation: "Friend, I trust you."

Now, what does trust have to do with our antiracism work in the context of literacies, of teaching writing, of educating anyone, especially tutors and future teachers? Allow me to speak into a few of your illustrations and speak on one of my own.

When Robert, the tutor in your writing-center course, rehearses that one of the first things he would say to a writer is that he's going to help her fix her grammatical errors, Robert is trying to build trust. He is, in effect, asking the student to trust him, to have confidence in his abilities to help her with her paper. Of course, I think you were right to be alarmed about how and why he went about building trust, since he is playing into the very racist stereotypes that he wants to subvert. In other words, he's anticipating a racist reading of his abilities based on his ethnic identity. And he is eagerly embracing the burden of racial performance, trying to prove that he's the right type of Puerto Rican, the smart one. But this performance can never appease racism, that unrelenting, blood-thirsty beast! Robert is setting himself up for incessant surveillance and adjudication of his abilities by the very ones he's there to assist. What if he misses the subject/verb agreement in a client's paper, say, not marking where the student uses the construction "criteria is" instead of "criteria are." Or what if he says to a student, "'C'mon in. Let's you and I sit over at this table and talk today" instead of "Let's you and me sit...?" After these two instances, will it then be appropriate for someone to think he fails to catch these errors because he is Puerto Rican? To base his grammar on his race? It certainly shouldn't be. So, Robert is setting up trust on the wrong basis. Instead, trust has to be mutual. He could say to the writer, "We work together on all matters pertaining to your writing. But, of course, the project and the final product are entirely and ultimately yours. I'm here to assist in any way to make that paper sing the way you want it to. I have a few ideas about how that can work. But first, what are the ways you think we can work
As for you, my friend, I think it's fine that we may occupy different subject positions. You don't have to adopt my view on trust, nor really am I writing this to persuade you to. What's more important to me is the understanding... that I need that trust. But for you trust is beside the point. We may disagree, but what you're doing still cultivates that trust, we're still working together and are not at odds, our faiths are mutually influencing. Does trusting mean I won't make a mistake? Will you be perfect? Nope. But I trust that we will work to pursue success even though we will inevitably, sometimes miserably, fail.

My Dear Vay,

I'm not running for the hills at your assertion that you trust me, but I am scared. Partly I'm scared, as you've predicted, because I just know I'm going to fail in small and large ways and feel so much worse about those failures, even as I try to learn from them—because I will be failing you, my friend. I'm less worried about not having your back as I do have that fury inside that drives me—born of years of bearing witness already—than I am about having your back badly or inadequately. I'm scared of flying into battle as if I could speak for you, could speak better on your behalf than you could yourself. I'm scared of you seeing me in those moments when my own facility with the rhetorics of whiteness erupts. I'm scared of what you'll think of me when white supremacy becomes me and I perform what I abhor, failing to enact those principles I claim.

This morning, though, I lean into this fear, prodded by your letter, to try to discern more fully its dimensions. I play out worst-case scenarios (something I seem to be preternaturally good at). And where I go to is that I do, in fact, trust you too. I trust you to call me out, to call me back to mindfulness, and to stay with me as agent provocateur, and as my dear friend. I remind myself as I allow myself to acknowledge the mutuality of this trust that one of my challenges continues to be resistance to an overreliance on your trust and your good will; my challenge is to take responsibility for my own work, without asking...
or expecting you to teach me how or to do the work for me. And this, I recognize, points to a fault line. I trust that you will help me, teach me, stay with me; I know I can neither expect nor rely on you to do those things. I'm afraid I'll lean too hard on your trust, taking it for granted, as a right. And I know that your trust of me depends or should depend upon my willingness to do my own work. I gnaw on the fact of this fault line.

When I wrote that trust is beside the point, I should have said that I think white and whity folks have a complicated and troubling relationship with trust in antiracism work (as well as in refusals or resistance to joining that work). In the context of developing rhetorical readiness to recognize, acknowledge, and resist racism, white and whity folks must address this relationship in its complexity. My observation, and I suspect yours as well, is that at the early stages of engagement with the matters of race and racism, whites tend to expect trust from peoples of color and to express surprise and outrage when that trust is not forthcoming. To me, this phenomenon seems an effect of the logics of past and present, presence and absence, guilt and innocence. The origins and the worst of racism are firmly located in the past, many of us claim. We were not present at their inception nor were we present or complicit when things were at their worst. Therefore, we are innocent and bear little or no responsibility for things as they were or as they are now (to the extent that racism exists in the present and is an effect of history). If these claims are true, peoples of color have no reason not to trust us. As we continue to think and dialogue about race and racism, we whites may begin to feel that trust ought to be predicated on our intentions, which are, we believe, good and righteous. Failures to garner trust, or refusals to grant trust, become easily available exits from the work of antiracism. Too frequently, it seems to me, we treat the emotional labor of antiracism work as an insurmountable obstacle to meaningful engagement with other (rhetorical, epistemological, intellectual) dimensions of the work.

But even as white engagement with antiracism deepens, as we study more and try with increasing commitment and discipline to think, speak, and act differently, trust remains a complex and troubling matter for us, I believe. There is a competitive edge to white engagement. We begin to search for legitimacy as antiracists by seeking the approbation of our colleagues of color—your fondness, your friendship, your trust. And we seek legitimacy by acting in ways that compare favorably with other whites. We seek to cultivate reputations as good white people, better white people than other white folks, the best white person—the one who is trusted. In other words, we continue to live within and perform whiteness even as we begin to conceive of ourselves as "antiracist."

I wouldn't say this is a matter we talk about much (under the heading of things white people talk about when peoples of color aren't around); who would want to admit to feeling this nasty little desire (with its holier-than-thou edge) to be better than the rest, after all? But this dynamic, this tension, snakes between us, threatening our solidarity with one another as well as with the peoples of color with whom we affiliate. When I wrote that trust was beside the point, Vay, I was thinking of this: if I allow myself to be drawn into a sense of my own legitimacy by virtue of my friendship with you, then you and I have no relationship worth having—not because of anything you've done, but because of me, because of my deceit, my own forked tongue. Mine will be an empty or merely theatrical performance of friendship and of commitment to the work we do together and singly.

I do trust you, Vay, and want so much to be trusted by you. But I can't allow my yearning to be trusted to trump my ongoing labor toward performative antiracism: to enact what I say and write as I speak, write, act. This is what I mean when I say trust is beside the point. For me, the impetus, the driving force for my work as an antiracist educator and activist, has to be an ongoing critique of the (il)logics of racism, an ongoing decentering and nuancing of white implicativeness, of my own implicatedness in those (il)logics, and the intertwined commitment to remember and to imagine alternative futures in the everyday that composes my life. I feel, must feel, I think, your trust of
me as a gift and not a reward or an earned wage—as an honor I have no right to expect and for which I have every reason to feel gratitude and awe.

**QUERY**

Do we take responsibility for transforming racist conditions within the institutions, communities, and systems in and through which we live our lives? Do we accept that responsibility without displacing it onto those who are most subject to racism? Are we alert as we speak or write to those moments when we may reiterate positions or perspectives that reinscribe or reenact implicit or explicit racism? Do we stay, even when staying is hardest—when our own work is the subject of critique?

**Meditations on Antiracist Critique**

My Dear Frankie:

I’ve debated whether or not I should give voice to this concern. But I think I must. I read some of the work of our white antiracist colleagues and I am not encouraged to trust, I sigh and distrust. Over the past several years, I’ve been trying to understand and speak to Nancy Grimm’s book *Good Intentions*, which makes strong points against institutional practices that reify racism. Yet, ultimately when it comes to students of difference, particularly of color, she puts the burden on them (similar to the way your student, Robert, embraces the burden). Note what Grimm says: “When I meet with groups of students from traditionally underrepresented groups on my campus, I tell them that the most dangerous assumption they can make, the one that may lead to academic failure, is that the institution is fair. . . . I tell them directly that they will have to work harder and smarter than most students to be successful because our university was not designed with them in mind” (1999, 104).

Oh my God!!!

Frankie, Grimm’s book is over ten years old, but I still hear this perspective at conferences and read it in articles. This idea (!) continues to circulate and recirculate in our field and in our communities. The problems with it are many. But two stand out for me. The first is that people of color (in this case, students) have to become responsible for an institution’s racism. From this perspective and in this case, it seems as if it is the students’ job to master whatever expectations are held out for peoples of color by “dominant” groups—plus way (I say too much) more. It’s the old, “You have to work twice as hard to get half as far” line. Okay, I recognize the problem Grimm is pointing out, but her solution is wrong. It breeds further oppression. What if the students are only able to do just as much as students from dominant groups? What if they are only able to meet the expectations the university holds out for all others? Then what? The conversation should start here. Start with working to balance these scales in the institution, not putting further burdens on students.

The other thing Grimm misses is this: What if students from nondominant groups, those whom the university doesn’t have in mind, come to school just as prepared as those from dominant groups? What if everything else besides their racial background is exactly the same? Would you still tell the students they have to work harder and smarter? How will working smarter help them overcome the obstacles they continue to face, even though they’ve spent their entire lives working hard and have no intention not to work hard? You must then address the real problem, alleviating the circumstances that create the imbalance in the first place.

At this moment in her book, Grimm perpetuates a discourse of inequality. “The university doesn’t see y’all as equal; so now y’all gotta do way more just to get it to recognize you.” Huh?! Why not say, “The university has a responsibility to recognize each person as equal. It has failed to do that consistently, but y’all are not responsible for that failure in any way. And no further burdens should be added to you to try to accommodate that failure. It is part of my responsibility to find ways to support you in meeting the expectations the university has for everybody. You will not have more, if I can help it. As a professor, it is my job to build coalitions in the institution and to speak out and work for changes that will make the experience of students
of difference the same as those whom the university welcomes with open arms."

She'd have my trust if she uttered these different words followed by concrete actions.

Dear Vay,

One thing I think of as I read your critique of Grimm's work is that I'm glad you noticed and named a moment that many of us may have read over too easily or read past altogether. I'm sorry it had to be you who noticed and spoke to that moment, though. I feel sorry because of how often it seems we whites depend on peoples of color to offer such critiques and because I know that none of us yet have a good sense of what to do, how to process when critiques like yours come at us. Part of the work I hope we white antiracists will do is to work toward increasing awareness, reflectiveness, and critical engagement with what are really unexamined bits of cant or "common (non)sense."

Here's what I believe: neither meaningful transracial alliances nor authentic multiracial friendships are created by fiat. We do not create these relationships by the desire to do well together. They're developed over time as we think, talk, and act together, as we grapple with contested ideas together, write and revise our individual and collective stories together. You and I have had some time and have, I hope, a lot more time to grow with and for one another and to cultivate our ability to work together. And I'll grant you this: if we cannot trust that we are both committed to taking "a permanent seat at the table," even and especially when we are compelled to make this kind of critique or to receive it, then we can neither bond deeply with one another nor accomplish much together.

I guess what I'm saying is that for white folks taking a permanent seat at the table requires that we be prepared to process the range of conflicting feelings that might overtake us as we engage and are engaged by the contestation that attends the study of race matters. We need to be prepared to stay with the work and with and for one another even and especially when the conversation gets hard and it feels like our stuff—our thinking, feeling, knowing, learning; our contributions to the work—is on the line. We need to be courageous in raising the kind of critique you offer in response to Grimm's book. But I also think all of us, and maybe especially whites committed to combating racism, need to be courageous in leaning into those critiques when they come at our own work. This way of thinking about published antiracist or antippression work, in particular, is different than the way we might think about more traditional academic publications. Here the objective ought not to be to have the last word or to demonstrate through the writing that I am/you are the biggest and best expert of all on the topic. No, the object in antiracist writing is to write so that more and more people can join the conversation and so that the conversation continues infinitely or as long as it needs to anyway. When I think about what courage means in this context, I think it demands all of us (but I'm thinking now especially of white folks) not only intellectual engagement, the willingness to question and be questioned, to test what we think in the commons, but also a kind of spiritual and emotional readiness—humility—to learn and to change in public as we do in private: to let go of our sense of our published work as the substance of our legacy and to see, instead, our long lean into learning as the gift we bring to the labor.

QUERY

Do we approach our work as antiracists with humility? Do we think carefully and critically about the quality of our witness and the uses to which that witness may be put? Are we aware and reflective of the ways in which racism may inform our willingness to see, to hear, and believe the testimony of others?

Meditation on White and Whitelyt Witness and Testimony

Dear Frankie:

In this, the last of our epistolary exchange, but certainly not the end of our engagement with each other and the important
issues raised here, allow me to summarize something I’m still uneasy about. But let me begin my ending statement with an experience that will help me explain. I don’t remember telling you this story. I think I meant to, but now is the perfect time, I think.

The day after Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 presidential election, a friend of mine forwarded an email that contained a joke that he apparently intended me to also find funny. It read: “Drink plenty of water because there’s going to be a lot of salty crackers.” Besides suggesting that a large number of whites resent the outcome of the election, it also encourages Obama supporters, especially black ones, to be on guard against racial and social retaliation.

The message disturbed me.

My friend is white, middle class, a husband and father of two. He was born and raised, and currently lives, in California. And for the whole long time I’ve known him, he’s voted Republican. Now he sends an e-mail, disclosing his vote for Barack Obama and casting other whites in a negative, even intolerant, light?

I wondered: “What is this all about?”

To boot, this is the same friend who, a few years before, sent an e-mail that outlined the traits of best friends. One example presented was “the kid from kindergarten that traded his crayon with you when all that was left in the box was the ugly black one.”

I was bothered by this e-mail because my friend was unwittingly participating in the racist construction of blacks. For no adjective accompanied crayons of other colors, but the word associated with the color black—ugly!—was so disparaging. In this instance, my friend was also perpetuating white privilege.

As you know, white privilege describes advantages whites commonly enjoy that are not equally extended to nonwhite people. The American standard of beauty is an example. It is based on images of white people, whereas symbols of black people often are negatively rendered. I think we’ll agree that white privilege is not exactly the same as racism, since people like my friend may try to resist racist beliefs. Even so, prejudice definitely stems from white privilege.

This is why my friend’s postelection e-mail was disturbing, not because he’s upholding white privilege, but because he’s participating in the opposite—what I’m going to call “black revenge.” Cracker is a combined racial and class slur often used by whites and blacks to describe whites from lower income statuses who sometimes express unfiltered negative beliefs about minorities. It is also used to represent how blacks view whites from any economic class that may unfairly antagonize them. Using the term against unknown white voters and citizens puts blacks in the same cruel and antagonistic roles they resist and hope to eliminate. What makes the joke a manifestation of questionable privilege, the privilege to be counterracist, is that it was being freely circulated on the Internet without intellectual challenge or critique. At least I didn’t see any challenge to it.

From my perspective, both white privilege and black revenge breed prejudice and resentment. So I felt that if my friend truly believes in “change” and “hope,” the catchphrases of Obama’s campaign, then he can’t believe change is recycling the same hatred in a new package. He can’t believe that “hope” comes from making bullies out of people who have been historically oppressed. Supporting jokes, slurs, or any language and action that’s biased against white people is wrong because prejudice itself is wrong. The ongoing work is to eliminate prejudice in all forms, not simply to replace the face of the oppressed. I’m sure you agree.

This is not a kumbaya, turn-the-other-cheek perspective. For as long as whites ignore the fact of their privilege and insist on it, that insistence should be resisted. I know some who might read my friend’s e-mail in a more favorable light, as a sign of willingness to give up his racial privilege. If that’s true, his desire is a good thing, necessary even. I just hope he finds a more constructive way to do it.

I think what both of us, and what the antiracism movement in its best moments, are trying to do is to offer very solid ways
of pursuing antiracist work that does not assign the very privilege to people of color that we take away from whites. We’re not engaging in unfair maligning of whites. When we’re at our best, we’re deeply interrogating and analyzing whiteness. In this context, I think of Tim Wise’s important but not unproblematic work. In his book *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* (2009), he ends with several concrete steps that whites interested in pursuing antiracism should take. He writes:

Whites must take personal responsibility for addressing racism and white privilege (116);

Whites must learn to listen to (and believe) what people of color say about racism, especially in their own lives (120);

Whites must be willing to hear (and grapple with) the oft-spoken but real and disturbing history of their nation when it comes to race (151);

Whites should discover and connect to the unheralded but significant historical tradition of antiracist white allyship” (146–7).

I admire your project because it is doing what Wise suggests in quite specific ways, in the very context that is supposed to help level the playing field for everyone—school—and in the discipline that is the very foundation for education—reading and writing instruction. You urge whites to take personal responsibility for racism and white privilege, showing how well-meaning, even antiracist, whites must do this, must critique their whiteness, which is not the same thing as racism, but does often have the same results. You also urge listening to what people of color have to say, and you are yourself listening, engaging in both a retrospective listening with the stories about your brother and allowing those remembrances to intensify your hearing of people of color in the present. You are also grappling with American history in the midst of your academic and personal interrogation. And you stand, at least for me, as an example of a white ally in the tradition of antiracist work. This is a history that is important to connect to and highlight because too often whites believe this work is only for people of color. Whites may not see and are not regularly taught their personal racial histories and connections to antiracist work. So Black History Month becomes only for blacks and Latino Heritage Month becomes only for Latinos. And this kind of division is too bad and does not promote crosscultural understanding, when it has the very real potential to do so.

But, Frankie, I do have one ending concern, one that I was alarmed to see Wise succumb to in his book, but one that I think, in your case, these letters address. Under the section where Wise writes that whites must take personal responsibility for white privilege, he says that “if whites will not listen to voices from black and brown communities, then fine, they will have to hear it from their own. And not just once, but over and again” (2009, 119). I really appreciate this point, because, as I’ve said before, and have noticed so many times, that whites don’t really hear, or may stop hearing, or sometimes can’t always hear what people of color have to say on issues of race. So it becomes important for whites to say it so that other whites will hear it. James Baldwin once put this strongly, when he said that black people need witnesses. But, see, Frankie, my wonder is, must black people and people of color always have a white witness to authorize our voices? Are whites the only legitimizing voice on issues of race? And will people of color continue to be afraid to speak up and out? Will they only do so if a white ally speaks? I mean, how do we get to a point where this veil on diverse voices is lifted forever?

I find Wise’s advice to be troubling, even as I admire his call, because he calls for more whites to speak (a good thing), but then says, “Just maybe they will even begin to hear it from people of color, once they realize that their own sons and daughters and nephews and nieces are saying the same thing” (2009, 119).
I feel like here he is dropping the ball, leaving it too much to chance, not really carving out the space for listening to people of color. This is why I’m delighted that you invited a person of color to write with you, to share the discussion of this issue in the midst of your own work! It didn’t have to be me. But I’m glad it was, glad to have this experience to wrangle, to demonstrate, not by simulation but by actual engagement and practice, how we can work together toward an antiracist society and stick with it, even when it is sticky, quite risky.

Thank you for the experience, friend, and Godspeed to you and to your—oops! I mean “to our”—work!

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**AFTERWORD**

Years ago, Elizabeth Boquet was the keynote speaker at a National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing held in Lawrence, Kansas. The conference organizers had arranged a band for the conference reception. During one of their sets, Beth stepped up to the microphone, and to the band’s accompaniment sang an extraordinarily beautiful rendition of Curtis Mayfield’s song, “People Get Ready.”

*People get ready, there’s a train a comin’*
*You don’t need no baggaje, you just get on board*
*All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’*
*Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord*

*People get ready for the train to Jordan*
*It’s picking up passengers from coast to coast*
*Faith is the key, open the doors and board ‘em*
*There’s hope for all among those loved the most.*

*There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner*
*Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own*
*Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner*
*For there’s no hiding place against the Kingdom’s throne*

*So people get ready, there’s a train a comin’*
*You don’t need no baggaje, you just get on board*
*All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’*
*Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord*

(Curtis Mayfield 1965)

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